Full Length Research Paper

An Examination of Lawrence Bonjour's Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge

Omotosho I.F

Federal Polythecnic, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

Author's E-mail: omotoshoibrahimfatai@gmail.com

In his essay "externalist theories of empirical knowledge," Lawrence Bonjour argues that foundationalism cannot solve the epistemic regress problem because so called basic beliefs are not really basic. He argues that the very concept of justification is an obstacle to the idea of basic beliefs. He argues further that externalist theories cannot support a foundationalism that solves the regress problem. This is because they are ill equipped to do so. For Bounjour, externalist theories are false because they fail to give or provide sufficient conditions for justification. This paper examines Bounjour's argument against foundationalism and the externalist response. The paper observes that rationality requires good reasons. However, the paper reveals that there is a difference between the status of justification and the activities of justifying.

Keywords: Foundationalism, Externalist theories, Epistemic justification.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is traditionally conceived as justified true belief, hence the requirement that beliefs that are to constitute knowledge must be epistemically justified. Epistemic justification requires that every claim in an argument must be justified; a requirement that leads to an infinite and vicious regress of justification. The problem now is how to find solution to this problem - the epistemic regress problem. Foundationalism, a theory of empirical knowledge, tries to solve the regress problem by proposing a class of empirical beliefs that are self justifying, whose justification does not depend on other empirical beliefs. For foundationalism, there are basic beliefs which are justified but not inferentially justified and all chains of justification start with them.

However, Lawrence Bonjour (1981) disagrees that foundationalism can solve the epistemic regress problem because so called basic beliefs are not really basic. He argues that the very concept of justification is an obstacle to the idea of basic beliefs. He argues further that even externalist theories, a specie or modern version of foundationalism, cannot support a foundationalism that solves the regress problem. This is because they are ill equipped to do so.

For Bonjour, externalist theories are false because they fail to give or provide sufficient conditions for justification. This paper examines Bonjour's arguments against foundationnalism and the externalists' response. The paper observes that rationality requires good reasons. However, the paper reveals that there is a difference between the status of justification and the activity of justifying in internalist and externalist theories of empirical knowledge.

The Epistemic Regress Problem

In his article, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Justification" (1981, 53-57), Bonjour argues that foundationalism cannot solve the epistemic regress problem because so called basic beliefs are not really basic. According to him, the problem of how to avoid an infinite and vicious regress of justification arose as a result of the traditional conception of knowledge as justified true belief. Accordingly, true beliefs must be justified to be accepted as knowledge. The important point is that if the justificandum (something that is to be justified) belief is to be genuinely justified by the proffered argument then the belief that provides the premise (belief) of the argument must also be justified and so on. The result of this is that empirical knowledge is threatened by an infinite and vicious regress of justification. Empirical knowledge is threatened because so long as every new

step of justification is inferential, justification cannot be completed, even when it cannot really get started and so there is no justification and knowledge. This is the basis of the epistemic regress problem.

In response to the regress problem and to avoid skepticism, foundationalism holds the view that there are foundational beliefs that are non-inferentially justified. According to foundationalism, there are basic beliefs that are genuinely justified and whose justification is not inferentially dependent on further empirical belief(s) (Poston, 2010). These beliefs, they contend, are self-justified.

Bonjour's Argument Against Foundationalism

Bonjour objected to the claim of the foundationalist by asking a question, "How are basic beliefs possible?"(Bonjour1981,54) The problem raised by basic beliefs is whether a belief can be justified without support of or independent of any believed premises that might provide reasons for accepting it. When the concept of epistemic justification is explained or expatiated upon, one will observe that a belief cannot be said to be basic in the sense of being independent of believed premises that might provide reasons for its acceptance.

This is because knowledge requires epistemic justification and its main feature is its internal relationship to the goal of truth. Therefore, knowledge requires inferential justification. Secondly, the concept of epistemic justification has to do with one's epistemic duty which states that one should accept beliefs that are true, or likely to be true and reject beliefs that are false or likely to be false. To do otherwise is to be epistemically irresponsible or irrational.

The point Bonjour is driving at is that, if basic beliefs are to provide a basis or foundation for empirical knowledge; if empirical beliefs are to be inferred from them; for them to serve as justification for other empirical beliefs, that feature that made basic beliefs basic, must constitute the reason for their acceptance as basic and foundational. This feature, such as indubitability, certainty, etc, must also constitute a reason for thinking that the belief is true.

Since knowledge requires epistemic justification and since the concept of justification has to do with our duty to accept beliefs that are true or likely to be true or reject beliefs that are false or likely to be false, for the holder of a basic belief to be epistemically rational or responsible, he must believe with justification, that his belief has the features of indubitability, certainty, etc, and that the belief having these features are likely to be true. If this is so, the so called basic beliefs are not basic after all. The reason being that justification of the basic belief depends on these other beliefs.

Thus, Bonjour concludes that "If this result is correct, then foundationalism is untenable as a solution to the regress problem" (Bonjour1981,53)

The Externalist Response to Bonjour's Anti-Foundationalist Argument

To solve the regress problem a new version of foundationalism called externalism has been developed. According this version of externalism, a belief is justified by the cognitive reliability of the casual process via which it was produced. This view does not require that the believer has any sort of cognitive access to the fact that the belief producing process is in this way reliable in order for his or her believe to be justified. All that is needed for justification is that the process in question be reliable whether or not the person believes or knows that this is so or has any understanding of what specific sort of process is involved.

According to this view, you can have a justified belief without knowing what justifies it. It is not the evidence that the person is able to produce that justifies a belief. Rather, it is the source of the belief. The epistemic justification of a belief (basic) depends on the obtaining of an appropriate relation between the believer and the world. The relation may be causal or nomological. However, there might be a reason why a basic belief might be true but the believer does not need to have a cognitive grasp of the reason. So also the believer need not have any cognitive grasp of the reason why the belief is basic nor the relation that is the basis for the basic belief to be justified. Thus the justification of a belief needs no further beliefs and thus the regress problem is averted by this species of fundationalism.

Having explained this alternative strategy, Bonjour declares his intention to show that this version or species of foundationalism cannot solve the regress problem nor provide sufficient conditions for knowledge. He raises objections in form of clairvoyance to show that a person may be ever so irrational and irresponsible in accepting a belief when judged in the light of his own subjective conception of the situation and still turn out to be epistemically justified on the externalist note. That is, he may seem irresponsible from an epistemic standpoint in accepting such a belief and be justified from the externalist viewpoint.

According to Bonjour, to be epistemically irresponsible is to accept believes on other basis such as moral or pragmatic considerations, rather than that they are true, or reject them on other basis other than that they are false. It should be noted that externalists accept beliefs on the basis of the fact that they are reliably produced.

It is the view of this writer that Bonjour's objection is concerned with the externalists' separation of justification from evidence. This is because, for a belief to be justified (on the internalist note) that belief must be supported with evidence. The implication of this is that the believer must have access to what justifies his belief. In our everyday interactions, we need to give evidence for our beliefs on challenge. On this score, Bonjour seems right. Bonjour tries to expose this weakness of externalism by putting forward cases of clairvoyance that will reveal clearly this

fact and show that externalist theories cannot provide sufficient condition for justification.

The Clairvoyance Problem

(a) Samantha Case: Samantha believes that she has clairvoyance and her belief that the president is in New York is thereby reliably produced even though she has much evidence against her claim and that clairvoyance is unreliable.
(b) Casper Case: Casper believes he has clairvoyance and believes that the president is in New York. His belief is therefore reliably produced even though he has reason to believe clairvoyance is unreliable.
(c) Maud Case: Maud believes she has clairvoyance and her belief that the president is in New York is thereby reliably produced even though she has reason to believe clairvoyance is impossible.
(d) Norman Case: Norman is a reliable clairvoyant and believes that the president is in New York on that basis.
In all these cases, the clairvoyant is not intuitively justified in believing that the president is in New York even though he reliably believes that the president is in New York. It is intuitively clear that none of the cases are cases of justified belief or knowledge. This is because the available evidence to the clairvoyant from their own internal perspective would not license their belief that the president is in New York. Thus, externalism for Bonjour is false because reliability is not sufficient for justification. Externalism fails to solve the regress problem by avoiding the problem by not requiring an inferential justification of some beliefs.

Another problem, according to Bonjour, is the generality problem. Generality problem is the problem that pertains to the formation of the reliabilist position. According to the reliabilist, a belief is justified if the general sort of cognitive process from which it results is reliable in the way indicated. However, the question is; at what level of generality should the relevant process be characterized? (Bonjour, 2010, 214).

Particular or general? If the range of possible descriptions of the cognitive process of a belief is stated, then which one is the relevant one for applying the reliability principle of justification for instance? It may also be argued that since externalism does not require an epistemic (inferential) justification, will every true belief not be a case of justified belief. To avoid this problem, inferential justification should be required in some cases. The problem with this suggestion however is the task of determining which cases and this is hard.

However, if inferential justification is needed, then for one's belief to be justified, one must be able to give reasons or produce inferential justification for it. But this means that one must have cognitive access to what justifies one's belief. The implication of this is that babies, toddlers, children and animals who may not possess reason for their beliefs cannot be said to have justified beliefs .This is because

justifying beliefs requires considerable intellectual ability and self awareness which animals, children, toddlers and babies do not have .However, the truth is that they do have justified beliefs because the way in which they form belief is reliable.

The internalist may insist that the child is not justified, this is because the fundamental problem with externalism according to Bonjour is; why should the mere fact that such an external relation obtains between one's belief and the external world-mean that such a belief is epistemically justified when the relation is entirely outside the believer's ken? (Bonjour,1981, 55)

This objection of Bonjour may not strictly apply as externalism grants that the person for whom a belief is basic need not have any grasp of the reason even though there must, in a sense, be a reason why a basic belief is likely to be true. Thus, a claim is justified on the externalist note even though the claimant may not "possess" reason for holding that the claim is true. Justification, on the externalist note, is different from justification on the internalist account.

Bonjour also examines the claim of some externalists that only externalism can solve the lottery paradox. The paradox was previously thought to be an argument against internalism which holds that, in order to be justified an agent must have a cognitive grasp of the reasons why his belief is likely to be true.

According to Bonjour's version of the lottery paradox;
there are 100 lottery tickets, one of which will win and 99 of which will lose, I am justified in believing that of each individual lottery ticket, it is so unlikely to win, that I know that it will lose. But I know that one ticket will win. How can I know of each individual lottery ticket that it will lose while I also know that some ticket will win? Internalism requires that I know that a ticket will lose only if I am certain that it will lose. Generalizing this is to require certainty for justification. However externalism can require certainty for justification without requiring that we have such justifications available from our internal perspective. An externalist may argue that all that matter or relevant is that one's belief and the facts be related by some true law of nature. Bonjour's reply is that I do not know that each ticket will win. The main problem is that the agent knows that at least one proposition in a set of highly probable propositions is false…it seems intuitively clear that I do not know any of these propositions to be true. If I own one of the tickets I do not know that it will lose, even if in fact it will, and this is so no matter how large the number of tickets might be (Bonjour,2010,206,207)

An externalist may argue that these criticisms pre-suppose the Cartesian picture which takes justification to be central and certainty to be knowledge; Externalism does not require certainty for knowledge. So, it is no objection to externalism that it does not provide a sufficient condition for justification.

Thus, for (such) externalists as seen above, the regress problem does not arise. Skepticism also may not

be a problem. In the opinion of this writer, all these amount to externalists' rejection of the traditional idea of epistemic justification and knowledge, a rejection which also amounts to externalists' giving up on the regress problem. Thus, externalism, according to Bonjour, cannot solve the regress problem and cannot give sufficient conditions for knowledge.

However, externalism is valuable. It has to do with what justification is in the real world. For instance, it should be noted that on the externalist account that all evidence is not needed for justification. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the concept of justification that internalists are defending is philosophically interesting but it does not help us understand non skeptical cases and justification in the real world.

The traditional idea of knowledge is that knowledge is certainty. Thus a belief must not only be true but must be justified. Every claim or premise in an argument must be supported by evidence. And every supporting claim must be supported by another proposition and so on. A believer needs to possess evidence for his claim in order to be justified; a process that has led to an infinite regress of justification.

However in contemporary times, this idea of knowledge has been reviewed. Externalism which is a theory of knowledge holds that you can have justified belief without knowing what justifies it. Bonjour challenged this claim on the basis that one cannot have justified belief on the externalist account. For Bonjour to be justified means that one must possess reasons for his claim. He tried to reveal this by putting forth cases of clairvoyance and the lottery paradox. On the internalist account, to be justified, one must be able to give reasons for his claim. This is because rationality requires good reasons. This is important especially in skeptical cases.

However, in non skeptical cases in practical life situations, the claim of externalists that you can have justified belief without evidence (knowing what justifies it) seems true in view of the fact that unsophisticated epistemic subjects such as higher animals (like dogs, cats, e.t.c), children and relatively unsophisticated adults do have justified beliefs. Even Bonjour seems to agree when he says, "...surely, it is alleged, it is much more obvious that some or all of these various; kinds of relatively unsophisticated individuals (and surely the matured and capable adults) do have justified beliefs and do have knowledge of the sorts in question than it is that internalism is true. And thus if internalism yields such implausible results it should be rejected" (Bonjour, 1992, 132).

For the externalist, these unsophisticated subjects have knowledge even though they could not give a justification for this by appealing to the available evidence from their internal perspective. Thus, we need externalism. It is no objection to externalism that it does not provide a sufficient condition for justification and knowledge. There is a difference between justification and the activity of justifying in both externalism and

internalism. A knower may not posses (know) the reasons for what he claims to know on the externalists note.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Bonjour's claim that foundationalism cannot solve the regress problem because so called foundational beliefs are not really foundational. The paper also examined his claim that externalist's theories of knowledge are false because they fail to provide sufficient condition for knowledge. After a critical examination of the above claims of Bonjour, the paper reveals that there is a difference between justification and the activity of justifying in internalist and externalist theories of knowledge. Externalism seems true considering the fact that animal's children etc, do have justified beliefs even though they do not have cognitive grasp of reasons for holding such beliefs. Since such beliefs are reliably formed then they are epistemically justified according to externalism. Justification in externalism is different from justification in internalism. The same goes for the act of justifying. Thus, Bonjours claim that externalism does not give sufficient condition for knowledge seems implausible as justification and the act of justifying on the externalist account are different from that of the internalist. Under the externalist account the clairvoyants, for instance have justified beliefs and sufficient conditions for knowledge. The clairvoyant do not need to have access or know the reasons for holding their beliefs. All that is needed is that the beliefs are reliably produced and show that they are reliably produced. They do not need inferential justification of the internalist sort.

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